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AUTHOR Lehman, Barbara A.; Scharer, Patricia L.
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ABSTRACT

A study examined similarities and differences between adults' and children's responses to the same children's book, and the role of discussion in shaping adults' perceptions about the book and their understanding of children's responses. Subjects, 129 students in five university children's literature classes, read and responded in writing to Patricia MacLachlan's "Sarah, Plain and Tall." Students collected verbal and/or written responses from 140 children in grades 3-8 as the child read or listened to the book. The college students then engaged in group discussion about the book and completed an open-ended questionnaire. Results indicated that: (1) initial responses by both children and adults were more reader-based rather than text-based; (2) children tended to take the book more at "face value" and read for enjoyment; (3) children identified more with the child characters; (4) boys were less enthusiastic than girls about the book; (5) by far the most responses from children related to the characters; (6) child readers made few comments about themes; and (7) children made comments demonstrating awareness of the author's crafting of the story. Results also indicated that class discussions were important for adult readers' responses to the book in eliciting more text-based responses; the nature of the discussion influenced adults' insights; and discussion was important to adults' understanding of the children's responses. Findings suggest that discussion is important to bring out readers' analytical stance. (Contains 15 references and a table listing coding categories.) (RS)

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Barbara A. Lehman
The Ohio State University
at Mansfield
1680 University Drive
Mansfield, Oh 44906
419-755-4263

Patricia L. Scharer
The Ohio State University
at Lima

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Running head: Children and adults reading

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Children and Adults Reading Children's Literature:

A Comparison of Responses

The trend toward literature-based reading programs has focused attention on children's response to their reading. Research over the last 20 years has documented the developmental nature of response thoroughly. Many studies (e.g., Hickman, 1983) have continued to support findings by earlier researchers such as Purves (1975) and Applebee (1978) that children's responses differ by age and cognitive developmental level. Galda (1982) and Rogers (1991) extended this research to demonstrate the variability of same-age children's response processes. However, with the exception of studies such as those by Mertz (1973) and Fisher (1985) who compared adolescent and adult responses, research has yet to inform questions comparing adults' and children's responses to the same literary work.

Now scholars are noting the importance of teachers as readers, as well. Zancanella (1991) wrote that in the same way that the writing project movement has contributed to teaching writing, literature teachers could benefit from studying themselves as readers, for their reading experience can "serve as a source of pedagogical knowledge" (p.30). Hade (1993) characterized teachers as "the most important readers in elementary school classrooms" who "show their students possible ways literature can be read" (p.2).

Like all readers, teachers find that discussion with other readers can make a book more memorable and that such first-hand

experiences can enhance their understanding of reading as a transaction (Andrews-Beck & Rycik, 1992). Researchers such as Nystrand and Gamoran, (1991) and Alvermann, O'Brien and Dillon (1990) have documented the importance of classroom discussions to the reader's textual understanding as well as difficulties teachers experience while attempting to participate in a "grand conversation" (Eeds & Wells, 1989, p. 4) with their students.

Linking these three areas of research--reader response, teachers as readers, and the role of discussion in creating meaning--may benefit literacy practice by providing insight into the nature of children's and adult's responses to literature and issues related to book discussions in classroom settings.

METHOD

Two questions were explored in this study: (1) What are the similarities and difference between adults' and children's responses to the same children's book? (2) What is the role of discussion in shaping adults' perceptions about the book and their understanding of children's responses?

Participants and Data Collection

Data for this study were gathered as part of a class project in five university children's literature classes. Our purpose, as teacher-researchers, for the project was to create learning experiences for our students by exploring their individual and collective responses to a book and comparing those responses to the individual responses of children.

Students in the university classes (N=129) read and

responded in writing to Patricia MacLachlan's Sarah, Plain and Tall (1985). We chose this book because it combines literary merit (as a 1986 Newbery award winner selected by adults) and child appeal (as an International Reading Association/Children's Book Council Children's Choices selection). Students were encouraged to record their thoughts and feelings during their reading and to note topics or portions of the book they wished to discuss with their peers during a class meeting. Students also collected verbal and/or written responses from at least one child each (in grades 3-8) as the child read or listened to this book. Data collected about children's responses (N=140) varied and included transcriptions and notes taken by adults during conversations with children, pictures drawn by children, and children's journals.

Students then brought both sets of responses to their university class to share during large group discussion. Each discussion session began with opportunities for students to share their own and their child readers' responses. As the discussion progressed, we posed open-ended questions depending on the topics shared by the students. Our purpose was to pose questions selectively that would encourage the creation of deeper meanings, the development of literary elements such as plot, setting, character, or theme, and better understanding of both children's and adults' responses. For example, we inquired about such ideas as, how do you think Anna's feelings toward Sarah compare with Caleb's feelings toward her? How did you and your child reader

respond to the book?

Following the whole group discussion, we asked students to reflect on this project and complete an open-ended questionnaire by writing about two topics. First, we asked students to describe new insights gained about Sarah, Plain and Tall or responses to the book as a result of the class discussion. Next, we asked students to reflect upon this assignment and the class discussion as a whole and to explain any conclusions they would draw about the comparison of adults' versus children's responses to Sarah, Plain and Tall. Since our focus in this study was on adults learning about differences and similarities of adult and child perspectives on a book, it was appropriate that the data collected relied heavily on responses of adults to the book, what they learned about children's responses, and how participation in a discussion shaped their understanding of both the book and the responses of children and adults.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was largely inductive and proceeded recursively through four levels (Tesch, 1990). During the first level of analysis, we read each data set repeatedly and identified two broad sources of response: reader-based and text-based (see Table 1). Reader-based responses related to personal feelings, personal values and preferences, and connections made by the reader to experiences or other reading. Text-based responses were more analytical, interpretive, and/or evaluative in relation to the literary elements and literary structure of

the text and the author's crafting of it. During the second level of analysis, we looked for recurring patterns within each of these broad categories and began to develop a tentative set of coding categories that were changed and refined during multiple rereadings of the data. We then coded all data according to categories in Table 1 during the third level of analysis. Finally, we used the coding categories to describe the differences and similarities between adults' and children's responses.

RESULTS

Results that answer our first research question will be presented first, followed by those related to the second question.

Comparisons Between Adults' and Children's Responses

Data analysis revealed that initial responses by both children and adults were more reader-based rather than text-based. There were both differences and similarities between adult and child responses along both of these dimensions. First, the reader-based response categories will be discussed followed by examples of text-based responses from both groups.

Reader-based responses

Focus. In terms of focus, children tended to take the book more at "face value" and read for enjoyment. They shared strong responses to the relationships and feelings of characters with whom they could identify and to certain events that captured their imagination (i.e., sliding down the haystack). The adults'

focus, in contrast, emphasized more the literary elements and deeper meanings. They sometimes overlooked details noticed by children. For example, it was a child who wondered when Sarah went to town with the horses, who would bring them back if Sarah didn't return?

Identification/feelings. Children identified more with the child characters (to the point of becoming "part of the characters in the book") and sometimes identified with the one child most near to themselves in age. They also expressed strong feelings about the story--worrying over Caleb's and Anna's feelings about their mother's death, whether Sarah would stay, and if she would like them. On the other hand, many adults identified with all the characters at various times. They were concerned with the children's feelings, empathetic with Sarah's desire to to have a family, and understanding of Jacob's feelings toward Sarah.

Experience/background. Children had more limited past experience and background knowledge upon which to draw in relating to the book (especially with the unfamiliar historical setting). They were curious about the mail order bride concept, vocabulary (i.e., "Wooly Ragwort"), and the pioneer lifestyle. They frequently related the book to their own experiences, such as moving or sibling relationships. They compared the book to its movie version or to the "Little House" books, which have a similar setting. Adult readers, with more experience to draw upon, compared the book to their own lives, but also stated they

enjoy books that don't reflect their personal experiences. They related Sarah, Plain and Tall to other books about children losing a parent, like Dicey's Song (Voigt, 1982).

Evaluation. Children recorded a large number of responses in this category. While most enjoyed the book overall, some gender preferences appeared: boys were less enthusiastic than girls. Of 39 boys, 11 did not like Sarah, Plain and Tall, while only 5 of 93 girls did not; seven children did not express a preference. Most children evaluated the book personally (i.e, "I liked how Caleb was called loud and pesky"). They also reacted to specific scenes or details (such as, the mail order bride idea being "crazy" or "weird"). In contrast, adult readers based their evaluation less on personal preference and more on literary criteria, sometimes "picking the book apart looking for flaws." All but 14 enjoyed the book; five had no preference and nine disliked it. There were so few adult males that no gender preference could be established.

Text-based responses

In some respects, children's text-based responses were more limited than adults, but every category did contain at least one response from a child reader. For the adults, many of their text-based responses arose during and after the class discussions. Because of space, our discussion will be limited only to the most salient comparisons.

Characterization. By far the most responses from children related to the characters--how they were feeling, why they did

certain things (for example, why Sarah drew pictures of the sea), and what the characters were like (i.e., Caleb was innocent and asked questions others wouldn't ask, while Anna was more reserved toward Sarah). Like children, adults focused on the reasons for characters' actions. But they also noted how the characters were revealed: Sarah's strength, dependability, and courage; how Anna felt about Caleb; and that Caleb seemed lively and imaginative.

Plot. While most children believed that Sarah would stay, a few were not sure about the ending--maybe there still would be a twist. Adults, on the other hand, felt that the epilogue leaves the reader with an assurance of security and the upcoming wedding. They noted how the plot tied everything together, such as at the end when Sarah brought back the colored pencils.

Foreshadowing/suspense. Related to the children's speculation about Sarah's intentions, many discovered "clues" that Sarah would stay with the family. For instance, one reader noticed that Sarah left her cat and seashell collection behind when she went to town. Still others observed her language: "our dune," "us," "we," "later," and "soon." Children also stated that the suspense kept them reading. Similarly, adults heeded the foreshadowing of Sarah's decision: her growing attachment to the farm or picking flowers and hanging them to dry for winter.

Themes. Child readers made relatively few comments about themes. However, one child described the book's central meaning as "home is where the heart is." In contrast, adults had more insights about themes. They listed such ideas as, building

relationships: to belong and be loved is a basic need of all humans; how facing hard times together makes a family; and how one will always miss certain things "no matter where you are." Also, related to their comparisons of this book with others about losing a parent, adults commented that following such a loss, a child character assumes responsibility for a younger sibling and there is a role adjustment when an adult guardian enters the picture.

Writer's craft. Perhaps somewhat surprisingly, children made comments demonstrating awareness of the author's crafting of the story. They observed how the author kept the chapters flowing, that MacLachlan "did a nice job with the tornado scene," and that the book title reflects what Sarah said about herself in her letter. Adults, like children, regarded favorably how the text flowed. In addition, they expressed appreciation for the author's style, for example, in such details as the change in how Sarah signed her successive letters to the family.

The Role of Discussion

First, class discussions were important for adult readers' responses to the book in eliciting more text-based responses, as noted above. Adults felt that these discussions went beyond the superficial, summarizing comments often characteristic of casual book conversations. They saw other ways of interpreting the story (how Anna blamed Caleb, for example) or found confirmation from others for their own responses (such as, how other readers felt the same about Caleb), which led them to greater

appreciation of the book after the discussions.

Second, the nature or direction of discussion influenced adults' insights. We found that response sets from each class tended to contain some similar insights that were different from the other sets: for example, comparisons with "The Sound of Music," viewing the book as a "love story" or romance, and whether or not the book deserved the Newbery award. Some insights obviously were prompted by questions asked by the instructors (i.e., dialect contributing to the setting or songs as symbols), while other insights were spurred by class participants' responses.

Finally, discussion was important to adults' understanding of children's responses: a) they recognized many of the comparisons between adults' and children's responses presented earlier; b) they understood how children at different age levels responded differently to the book (for example, one adult noted how some younger children missed clues about Sarah's staying); and c) they noticed that, although some generalizations could be made about children's responses, individual children also responded differently to the book. In this regard, they commented that children's responses reflected their own unique prior experiences.

DISCUSSION

This study, while limited in scope and design, adds needed information about comparisons between adults' and children's responses to one children's book, which may help teachers better

support their students' transactions with literature.

Because responses to books read alone tend to be more reader-based and personal, discussion is important in bringing out readers' analytical stance. Therefore, adults need to engage in book discussions with other adults, as well as with children. They also need to discuss children's responses with other adults to understand these better. Furthermore, the nature of discussion influences insights about a book or responses to it. If certain insights seem important, adults need to lead in those directions with a light touch, using questions that encourage children to express their thoughts and challenge the opinions of others. We found that children are capable of analytical, interpretive, and evaluative thinking. Adults can help children move beyond their primary, personal responses to a re-examination of literary structure and the place of any single work within the context of literature as a whole. Appropriate, open-ended questions and activities can subtly approach literary concepts; the labels can come later when children are ready for them.

Finally, we believe that children can enhance adults' responses to books with their attention to detail, their curiosity and desire to learn, and their ability to get in touch with personal feelings. Adults need to be willing to follow children's lead in discussions, because their insights sometimes are fresher and more immediate and often can broaden our perspective.

Table 1. Coding Categories

Reader-based:	
Focus	Characterizations of the reader's purpose or focus in reading
Identification/ feelings	Expressions of feelings about characters or events
Experience/ background	Connections to both personal and other literary experiences, curiosity about unfamiliar concepts
Evaluation	Statements indicating what readers did or did not like about the book
Text-based:	
Symbolism	Music, song, flowers, color, prairie/sea
Language	Vocabulary, sentence structure, dialect
Imagery	Imagery, description, visualization
Characterization	Development and revelation
Plot	Storyline
Foreshadowing/ suspense	Clues provided by the author, devices that keep the reader wanting to know what will happen next
Themes	Deeper meanings, main ideas
Setting	Time and place, how they are established
Point of view	Perspective from which the story is told
Tone	Mood of the story and events in it
Writer's craft	Expressions about the author's work

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